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REVIEW OF ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS SYSTEM RELATING TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: AN INTERACTIVE DISCUSSION

Information received from the United Nations system

UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND (UNICEF) AND INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Background

1. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was created by the United Nations General Assembly in order to help children in Europe after the Second World War. Today, operating in 161 countries and territories of the world, UNICEF is mandated by the General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children's rights, to help meet their basic needs and to expand their opportunities to reach their full potential. Working together with national Governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other United Nations agencies, UNICEF strives to ensure that children are provided with the necessary basic social services and supplies and that policies and budgets are in the best interests of children.

2. UNICEF is governed by a 36-member Executive Board, members of which are elected each year by the Economic and Social Council from among States Members of the United Nations representing all regions of the world. The Board establishes its policies, reviews its programmes and approves budgets for the organization. Headquarted in New York, UNICEF carries out its work through seven regional offices (Abidjan, Amman, Bangkok, Geneva, Kathmandu, Nairobi and Panama City) and 126 country offices. In addition, in 37

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industrialized countries, National Committees for UNICEF have been established as non-governmental partners in the UNICEF family. The National Committees raise awareness about UNICEF's work, advocate for and educate about children's rights, and raise funds for the organization.

Basis for work

3. According to UNICEF's 1996 Mission Statement, UNICEF is guided by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and strives to establish children's rights as enduring ethical principles and international standards of behaviour towards children. In particular, UNICEF is committed to ensuring special attention and protection for the most disadvantaged children, giving priority to those countries in greatest need.

4. The principle of non-discrimination, as articulated in article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is at the core of UNICEF's work. UNICEF recognizes that children experience discrimination in various forms, based on language, ethnicity, gender, disability, economic status, etc. Such discrimination may affect their access to education or health care, as well as limit their opportunities to develop and grow. The particular rights of indigenous children to enjoy their culture, practise their religion and use their own language are also protected, under article 30 of the Convention.

5. UNICEF has recently adopted its Medium-Term Strategic Plan, which lays out the priorities for the organization for the period 2002-2005. The substantive areas of work described in the plan are: immunization plus, integrated early childhood development, girls' education, HIV/AIDS and child protection. Cutting across these areas are the principles of non-discrimination, best interests of the child and children's participation in decisions that affect them. Within the framework of this plan, UNICEF will strive to uncover disparities and all forms of discrimination, understand their root causes, and contribute to solutions which will allow every child to enjoy all of his/her rights.

Recognition of indigenous issues

6. UNICEF has been working with indigenous peoples in a number of countries, especially in South America, for many years. However, the adoption of a human rights-based approach to programming has encouraged a specific focus on the marginalized and excluded, including indigenous communities, by UNICEF country offices worldwide. UNICEF situation analyses have shown that almost everywhere in the world, where figures are available, indigenous peoples are reported to be among the most disadvantaged. High proportions live in poverty, some in extreme poverty. Rates of infant mortality among indigenous communities are frequently much higher than those of the population at large and access to health care is limited. Primary school enrolment is often low and many communities lack adequate housing, water and sanitation facilities. Opportunities for indigenous peoples to have access to policy makers and decision-making processes are insufficient, and questions of cultural development, education and health are often left unaddressed. UNICEF recognizes that all of these issues are essential to protecting the rights and ensuring the well-being of indigenous children.

Programme activities

7. In response to the many challenges facing indigenous communities, UNICEF supports a wide range of programme activities designed to improve the situation of indigenous children and ensure better respect for their rights.

8. In the area of **education**, UNICEF supports programmes to promote enrolment in and completion of primary school among indigenous children in Brazil, Colombia, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Venezuela, Malaysia and Namibia. Specific bilingual and multicultural education programmes are under way in Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama and Venezuela. For example, in Brazil UNICEF supported a programme to teach Yanomami children in northern Roraima to read and write in their mother tongue, and in Sao Gabriel de Cachoeira in Amazonas, the primary education curriculum has been adapted for use with indigenous groups and reaches 3,000 children. In Bahia, Brazil, UNICEF supported the Indigenous Education Forum to encourage debate about indigenous education by civil society, universities and the state secretariat of education. In Namibia, 2001 marked the start-up phase of a project to address the educational exclusion of San children in the Omaheke administrative region. The project aims to integrate San children into the mainstream system by training San community resource persons who mediate in cases of conflict, assist parents with school enrolment formalities and follow up on cases of dropout.

9. **Integrated early childhood development** programmes are a part of UNICEF programming for indigenous people in Brazil, Suriname (Caribbean Area Office), Namibia, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela. UNICEF contributes towards the provision of **basic services** for indigenous populations in such countries as Argentina, Suriname, El Salvador, Peru and Venezuela. In El Salvador, the PROMAYA project supplied latrines, potable water, educational materials and training in primary health care. In the Caribbean Area, the Suriname Integrated Area-Based Programme serves 53,000 indigenous Amerindians and Maroons living in the Amazon basin, providing basic services and building capacity. In Argentina in 2000, work began in two indigenous communities in the province of Neuquen, in the south-west, to provide drinking water and install sewer systems in households and schools.

10. **Health, immunization and nutrition** programmes for indigenous people are part of UNICEF programmes in Bolivia, Guyana, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela. In 2000 in Panama, UNICEF helped reduce the prevalence levels of iodine deficiency in the indigenous zone of Azuero from 22 per cent to 11 per cent. In 2001 in Peru, videos on healthy and safe motherhood using indigenous actors were produced for use with the indigenous Andean and Amazon population. In 2000, the Guyana country office carried out efforts to improve immunization coverage in four regions inhabited by indigenous peoples. In Paraguay, UNICEF continued efforts begun in 2000 to adapt community-based Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI) strategies for use by indigenous health promoters in Amambay and Concepción. Based on these experiences, UNICEF supported the establishment of an inter-institutional committee on indigenous health and a major consultation with indigenous leaders, concluding with an agreement to continue to develop adaptations needed to ensure indigenous people's access to health services. In Venezuela in 2001, over 3,000 people from 23 indigenous communities and four different ethnic groups received medical attention from doctors and nurses brought to the communities by boat.

11. Other countries, including Argentina, El Salvador and Malaysia, have supported the training of traditional birth attendants (TBAs) and health service agents for indigenous communities. In Malaysia UNICEF trained primary health-care workers, TBAs and traditional healers working with Orang Asli at district level.

12. **Indigenous women** are a particular focus of UNICEF support in several countries, including Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Peru and the Philippines. In Ecuador, under the framework of Gender Policies Toward the Year 2002, activities provide legal protection and deliver services for indigenous women involved in cases of domestic violence. In the Philippines, UNICEF has supported female functional literacy classes for mothers. Training materials have been translated into five major dialects for coverage among indigenous and marginalized groups. UNICEF and its partners have also begun to address gender disparities in the indigenous mountain regions of the north and in southern Philippines by developing girl-friendly school initiatives. In Colombia, UNICEF supported workshops on indigenous rights and gender equity for 235 women and 80 men. It is believed that as a result, there has been a noted reduction in intra-family violence and an increase in denouncements of mistreatment and abuse.

13. **Advocacy for child rights** is central to UNICEF's support to indigenous peoples, as confronting discrimination is a first step towards respect for human rights. In Venezuela, UNICEF supports the annual Convivencia de Niños and Niñas Indígenas (Meeting of Indigenous Boys and Girls), which takes place during the international week of the indigenous, a cultural exchange organized by the Network of Wayuu women in Zulia State. UNICEF introduced child rights as a main theme of the event. In Thailand, following a recommendation of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF supported dissemination of indigenous-language versions of the Convention and the production of child rights audio tapes for the highland communities in the north of the country. In Venezuela, UNICEF supports a multilingual community-based radio station, including the training of indigenous people as local correspondents. Broadcasts promote community participation and awareness of children's rights. In Viet Nam, through its Mai Communication Initiative, UNICEF has produced materials, newspapers and animated films in indigenous and minority languages to teach children about their rights and other important issues.

14. **Policy reform** is also recognized as a critical element in improving the lives of indigenous peoples. In Peru, UNICEF reviewed national laws in terms of discrimination against children of indigenous people, providing legal and technical advice to the Senate and the House of Representatives. A new area of action for UNICEF cooperation in Ecuador is within the framework of the National Dialogue agreed upon between indigenous and *campesino* organizations and the Government. UNICEF supported the elaboration of proposals on fiscal reform and social spending, social policies and the public budget and the situation of indigenous people's access to education and health. At the regional level in Latin America, UNICEF organized a Meeting on Indigenous Children to exchange experiences on the formulation of public policies to benefit indigenous children, which was attended by representatives from seven countries of the region.

15. **Studies** are being carried out in a number of country offices in order to get the information needed to determine the specific situation of indigenous children and women. Data collection and analysis on disparities and discrimination, by including data disaggregated by gender, geographic location, poverty status, culture/ethnicity and other locally relevant categories, is key to this process. The studies include a study of Mayan traditions and perceptions about work and education in Guatemala, a community survey of 11 Amazon villages in Guyana, a study on culturally appropriate integrated educational strategies for children of indigenous people in the Philippines, the incidence of maternal mortality in three rural states with large indigenous populations in Mexico, and research on the child-raising practices of the indigenous population in Ecuador.

Working with UNICEF

16. The best way to learn more about the activities of UNICEF and identify potential areas for collaboration is to contact the UNICEF office in your country. (See www.unicef.org for office contact details.) As UNICEF is a decentralized organization, it is at the country level that decisions are taken with regard to specific programme activities and partners. Offices are generally staffed by a mix of international and national professionals, with an international person as Representative (head of the office). While the country programme of cooperation is between UNICEF and the Government, many UNICEF-supported activities within that programme are carried out in partnership with NGOs.